A View of the Past

The Third Decade (1983-1992)

by Lisa Harshbarger

As in previous years, the issues of *English Teaching Forum* from 1983 to 1992 included articles and commentary from contributors all over the world concerning the implementation of TEFL methodology in their particular teaching contexts. During the *Forum's* third decade of publication, however, the teaching context itself became a point of discussion.

As the communicative approach became the accepted way to organize and teach English language classes, teachers and researchers began to discuss the implications of related concepts, such as authentic use of the target language, learner-centered activities, and group work. Is it possible to set up authentic communicative activities in classes of 60 or more students who all speak the same language? Is the native speaker the only authentic model for English language use in a learner-centered classroom? Should learner-centered classrooms focus solely on language learning, or can the horizons of the classroom expand to include issues of direct concern to learner communities?

The following four articles were selected not because they provide the answers to these questions, but because they pose the questions themselves, in some instances for the first time.[1] In reading through ten years of *Forum* articles, I was struck by the fact that the English teaching profession is still debating these issues at conferences and in publications. Today, some scholars support extensive modification of communicative activities to meet the needs of learners in particular teaching contexts, while others encourage language teachers to use awareness-raising techniques to increase learners' understanding of the relevance of communicative activities to language learning.

Whatever the outcome of this debate, I am confident that it will be chronicled in future issues of the *Forum*.

1. The complete texts of these four articles can be found in the on-line version of the *Forum* at http://exchanges.state.gov/forum/.

English Teaching Forum @ forty — Celebrating 40 Years of Exchanging Ideas and Experiences 1962–2002

We live in reference to past experience and not to future events, however inevitable.

H.G. Wells
English novelist
(1866–1946)

Realistic and Real English

Roy Pearse

This article was published in the July 1983 issue of *English Teaching Forum* (vol. 21, no. 3, pp. 19–22).

The words *realistic* and *real,* along with *authentic* and *genuine,* are in constant use nowadays. It is worth making some distinction between them.…

The importance of setting

By *setting* I mean all the variables that make up the context of any sample of language: the mode (spoken/written), place, users, and so on. The more you define the setting, the more accurately you can forecast what the style of the language may be. Often learners have trouble with the setting, not with the language. Students are more at home with one setting than another, and this helps their language use correspondingly. One of the difficulties in teaching a language is that in one setting, a classroom, we have to teach and give practice in the language of many settings, all of them outside the classroom.…

The classroom convention

To relate teaching to real life there exists a "classroom convention." This convention is the acceptance of a set of rules that young children begin to pick up when they enter primary school for their first lesson. The outside world is brought into the classroom, sanitized, and ordered to be inspected more easily. When students go into a classroom, they accept the rule, just as they accept other rules when they open a novel, go into a cinema, or walk onto the football field.

An important nonlinguistic feature of the classroom convention is the attitude of the students. Students come to the classroom to sit and listen, to be driven, prodded, and generally organized. They are ready to be passive.

Following from this is the convention that the teacher asks all the questions and the students answer them. The teacher knows all the answers to these questions already. This is different from the situation outside the classroom.

There is a popular comic strip from Argentina called *Malfalda.* One character in the strip, Libertad, continually flouts the classroom convention. In one episode she is called to the front of the class and is asked the name of the longest river in South America. She doesn't know but reassures the teacher, "Don't worry. It's okay. I'll find out at home tonight and let you know tomorrow. Don't let it bother you," sidestepping one of the basic rules of the classroom game.

Now to narrow this down to language teaching. Recent methodology suggests that teachers should make language teaching as realistic as possible. This is done through role-playing in imagined situations, visual aids, information gap, group and pair work, video, and authentic tapes. It is all realistic and very necessary, but it is not real. The classroom convention still exists.

Useful distinctions

The distinction between *real* and *realistic* English is important. Real English is when you use language to say something. Realistic English is when you say something to use language. In the first case, you may ask the time because you're late for the dentist. In the second case, you ask the time because telling the time is today's topic.

Authentic materials are bits from life such as railway timetables or tapes of spontaneous conversation. Once they enter the classroom their use is realistic, not real. The problem with all aids is that they are overprotective and habit-forming. In a language laboratory, students become adept at talking to a tape recorder. This setting may not be of much use later. They still have to make the transfer from the tape to the street.…

The opportunities for real language in the classroom depend on many variables. For example, a French student asking a Japanese student the time in English is real. If he asks another French student in English, this is *realistic,* and he is following one of the conventions of the language class.

Some real uses of English

Here is a list of real uses of English…

1. Teacher-Student Interaction

a. Greetings. (The teacher's breezy "Good morning!" is not said to give the students practice in listening comprehension of greetings but is his normal way to start the day.)

b. Teacher's instructions. ("Don't write, just listen.")

c. Students' queries. ("How do you spell _____?", "What does _____ mean?")

2. Asking for Information

The students want to find out something they don't know. They ask the teacher or each other.

"Do you know the cheapest flight to London?"
"Can you get *Newsweek* at the local bookstore?"
"Do you shake hands when saying goodbye in England?"

3. Giving Information

a. The students answer the teacher's genuine questions about their country, culture, home life, etc.

b. The students produce a written report on something the teacher wants to know.

4. Personal Opinion

The students express what they really think in discussion or conversation. They ask for and listen to the opinions of the teacher and the other students.

5. Games

The students should play the game to win and not to speak English. The important part is the language the game gives rise to, not the language it contains.…

Of course, before they can use language to say something, the students have to learn it. This is what the teacher is for. There are two stages: learning and practice. In the first stage (learning) the language is realistic; in the second (practice) it can begin to be real.…

Teaching Composition to Large Classes

Duncan Dixon

Canada • 1986

This article was published in the July 1986 issue of *English Teaching Forum* (vol. 24, no. 3, pp. 2–5, 10).

One of the great challenges facing English teachers is that of teaching written composition to classes that number from 40 to 60-plus students. The problem is how to respond to the unwieldy numbers of compositions produced each week....

The starting point: Carefully chosen assignments

We need to start with the writing assignments themselves. The teacher should devise imaginative ways of presenting the required modes. Develop audiences for your student writers both inside and outside the classroom. Have your students prepare their best work for display on the classroom bulletin board; organize an in-class debate and have your students write a composition supporting one of the sides debated; have your classes submit articles to the school newspaper; take topics of current interest from the newspaper, discuss them, and have your students write letters to the editor as responses; talk to instructors in other subject areas in order to discover the types of writing they require of students, and develop assignments that teach your students how to write effectively in that style. Students who are writing for real audiences and working on assignments they see as useful will be much more willing to revise and polish their work.

Prewriting activities

Once you have decided on a suitable topic for a composition, develop prewriting activities in order to enhance the generation of ideas. Have your students brainstorm ideas in groups or as a whole class. Two "scribes" can write on the board the ideas the class generates, and the students can write their own lists of ideas from those suggested by the class.

Give your students a topic and have them "freewrite" as much as they can on that topic without stopping. Use journalistic questioning techniques—Who? What? When? Where? Why?—to explore a subject. Set up debates to help students clarify both sides of complicated issues.

Reducing the marking load through journal writing

Assign writing projects that require little marking, for example, a journal. The purpose of a journal is to allow students to record their thoughts and ideas in writing, but without having to concentrate on the written form. Initially, your students will need ideas about what to include in their journals. Give them a list of topics that will stimulate them to think as they write and that include the modes of writing that you wish to cover in more formal writing assignments….

Teacher response to journals is essential, but need not be extensive. Respond with encouraging remarks, arguments that reinforce or dispute what they have written, and questions that elicit more information....

Peer-group editing

Probably the most effective way to reduce the teacher's marking load is to set up groups in which students read one another's compositions and make suggestions for revision before the teacher grades them. The value for the students is that their writing is being read by real readers. We must train students to become observant readers by modeling editing skills before the whole class. The first response that students make to their peers' writing must always be directed toward the writer's intended meaning and not toward the surface errors. Some questions students might ask of both their own compositions and those of their peers are:

Purpose What is the author's purpose? To describe? To entertain? To narrate? Are there any sentences that do not support the writer's purpose?

Content Can you summarize this piece in a sentence? Is it clear or are there parts you find confusing? Does the writing contain new and interesting information?

Audience Who is the audience the author has in mind?

Organization Has the author organized the writing so you can follow the argument clearly? Does the writing move smoothly from one point to another?

Style Are all the sentences of the same length and type or has the author varied them?

Language and Mechanics Are the sentences grammatically correct? Are the spelling and punctuation correct?

After the editing procedures have been modeled, arrange your class in groups of from three to five students of varied ability and have them evaluate one another's compositions. Some suggestions are:

1. The reading and evaluation should be done independently, with all comments written on a sheet of paper separate from the composition.
2. Only the author should make any changes on the draft the students are reading.
3. The teacher should move throughout the class in a consultative role.

The teacher's response

Once our students have completed their assignments, then we as teachers must respond to them. Our initial response must be made in the way we respond to all writing—as readers looking for meaning....

We must resist the temptation to mark every error we encounter. The paper with every error highlighted in red is more likely to confuse, discourage, and anger students than to help them. We must help our students see that revision is not punishment for not having written a perfect composition on the first draft. When evaluating compositions, choose two or three types of errors on which you wish to concentrate.

It is possible to teach composition to large classes of students if teachers are willing to surrender some of the control of evaluation through peer response, allow the students to do some writing that will not be evaluated, and limit the number and type of comments they make about their students' writing to those that are most useful.

Coping with Large Classes

Rory McGreal

1989 • Bahrain

This article was published in the April 1989 issue of *English Teaching Forum* (vol. 27, no. 2, pp. 17–19).

Large mixed-ability classes have to be faced every day by EFL teachers around the world, who instinctively feel that they could do a better job in a smaller class. Grouping is one technique that has been used to reduce the negative effects of large classes....

Grouping

Small groups have been used to overcome the disparity of student aims and their varying levels of fluency in English. When the class is divided into smaller units, many learning activities can be undertaken that would not otherwise be feasible in a large class, particularly those of a communicative nature, such as group problem-solving or information-gap activities….

Three dangers should be avoided:

1. Sometimes all the potential troublemakers gravitate towards one group, which becomes a gang. Such problems should be forestalled by the intervention of the teacher.
2. There is also a strong tendency for students to form themselves into natural-ability groups. It is important for the teacher to ensure that no group is seen to be inferior.
3. Isolates should not be left out. However, students who genuinely wish to work alone, but who have friends and mix normally, should be allowed to do so.

Arranging the groups

Groups of from four to seven students are efficient in maximizing the communicative use of language. These groups can be organized according to a wheel pattern, where all groups communicate through a group leader; or through a circle pattern, where information is exchanged around the table in a circular flow....

The group tasks must be kept simple, filled with information-gap activities, and contain interesting subject matter. All these elements help to ensure that discipline problems or long embarrassed silences do not occur because of tasks that are inappropriate to the students' interests, capabilities, or desires.

The on-task activities to be done by the groups should be highly structured, with specific non-linguistic goals that can realistically be achieved by the students using structures they have previously learned. Games like Twenty Questions, where students must guess what one student has chosen, are effective in promoting simple question-formation practice, e.g., *Is it an animal?* Information-gap activities based on filling in charts and tables by asking other students for information are effective in eliciting other question types and appropriate responses.

Less controlled activities can be used with more advanced students. They can, for example, be presented with a task such as going camping, and, as a group, must decide what to take with them. Role-playing activities can also be used by groups for practicing new language structures.

The important point to remember is that the students are acquiring the language only when they are personally engaged in an on-task activity in English. The activity must have an overt goal presented by the teacher in such a way that it can be achieved only by using or understanding the linguistic structures being studied....

Cooperative rotation of large and small classes

There are a number of other ways to lower the teacher-student ratio without increasing the number of teachers. A section of a large class can be pulled out for different activities. If there are four classes of 30 students, 75 could go to a listening class supervised by one teacher and the other three teachers could then have conversation classes with groups of 15 students. Listening activities on tape or video can be effectively used to engage larger numbers of students while other teachers work with smaller groups. Similarly, teaching teams can be organized and students rotated so that all students get the benefit from the personal attention of small-class teaching. If there are two classes of 30 students, the teachers can take turns rotating the students through one class of 15 and three classes of 45.

Peer teaching has also been found to be effective in some circumstances—even though it is often the student-teacher who learns the most from teaching other students. It is important that they be provided with suitably simplified teaching materials based on precise goals and objectives that can be easily followed and effectively monitored by the supervising teacher….

The teacher's role

EFL teachers must maintain a classroom atmosphere conducive to educational activities. Teachers must be willing to share their power with the students in order to enhance the learning experience. As language teachers, we have far more in common with a music teacher or swimming instructor than with a history or philosophy teacher. This skills-based orientation implies a different role for the teacher. The teacher must not become less active in the classroom, but rather less the center of activity. A teacher who is monitoring, encouraging, and participating in different classroom groups will be even more active than the traditional teacher.

Although the evidence in support of small language classes is clear, EFL teachers still often find themselves having to cope with large classes. Nevertheless, EFL can be taught in these large classes. The positive aspects of teaching small groups can be simulated in large-class environments. The individual teacher's role is crucial in determining the rate of language acquisition and learning in the classroom. By re-organizing the classroom to allow more opportunities for communicative interactions and on-task activities, students will be in a better position for acquiring the second language.…

One Step Beyond ESP: EDP

Mamadou Gueye
Mali • 1990

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Many language learners expect to make a living out of the language they are learning by becoming teachers or translators. Many of them want to contribute to the socioeconomic and sociocultural development of their community, too....

The mission of EDP

Curriculum designers should map out priority issues related to various aspects of the development of the learners' community. The English teacher should then rely on this information to help learners, not only to realize the importance of the roles they will take in the development of their community, but also to develop critical thinking. This is what I have termed English for Development Purposes. EDP tries to make learners aware of issues in their community or their field, and prepares them to reflect upon these issues.

The implementation of EDP

The EDP curriculum should be based on clearly defined priority issues, ESP materials, and materials to develop critical thinking. EDP curriculum designers should ask learners to answer a self-evaluation questionnaire about:

1. Their objective in the English class.
2. Their assessment of community members' expectations and the socioeconomic and sociocultural conditions of their community.
3. Their desire to bring about social, cultural, or economic changes in their community life.

The EDP teacher should know priorities in the learners' communities. The EDP class should be an enjoyable forum, where learners exchange viewpoints on development issues that are of paramount importance in their community life.

How to promote conversation skills in an EDP class

At the beginning the teacher should introduce a list of the issues addressed by the curriculum designers. The learners should add to the list any issues that they think are crucial but have been omitted and select the most important issues to be studied during the training period.

Learners should first learn some debate strategies and a few language functions, such as how to introduce a problem, interrupt politely, apologize, and so on. Groups are formed according to points of view regardless of learners' specialities....

In the following game, called Diplomacy, the term "Ambassador" refers to the messenger of a group, whereas the term "Host" refers to any member of a group that is receiving a visit from a messenger. When group work starts, the most important ideas will be recorded by a member designated by the group. After everyone has presented ideas to the group, the recorder will read the notes aloud to the other group members. Groups will take turns sending their Ambassadors on explanatory missions and playing host to Ambassadors of other groups. The Ambassador gives a presentation of his group's point of view and responds to questions put to him by the Host group. After a short period of listening, the Hosts react, and notify the Ambassador whether they accept, amend, or reject the point of view. Then the Ambassador is expected to explain and defend the ideas he is presenting. Each Ambassador goes back to the home group to report on the Host group's reactions.

Discussions take place again within each group, and ideas are reformulated in light of the Host group's reactions. Next, the teacher will gather all the groups into a single class again and write on the blackboard the final ideas put forth by each group asking for suggestions, objections, and comments on the topic.

Finally, the discussions can be followed by an essay-writing assignment. In the essay learners may agree or disagree with a given point of view, attempting to convince or persuade others to accept or reject an opinion.

I tried the above techniques with successful results. The topic was "Drought," from which three main opinions emerged. The first group said that drought occurred in Mali because of climatic changes. The second group believed that drought resulted from mismanagement of environmental and natural resources. The third group thought that it resulted from the decay of our moral and religious values and symbolized divine punishment. After heated discussions we reached the following consensus:

Causes of the Drought in Mali

- Changes in the climate.
- Deforestation caused by men and animals, especially goats.
- Lack of clouds that cause rain.
- Decay in moral values in the sense that nobody cares about the preservation of natural resources.

Solutions to the Drought in Mali

- Sensitization of people to the gravity of the drought issue.
- Reforestation by planting and caring for trees.
- Educating people to use wood economically.
- Tightening of forestry regulations and prosecution of violators.

During the discussion we studied the vocabulary related to drought and its causes. To end the lesson, I asked learners to write an essay on the topic "If you were a leader, what would you do to solve the drought problem?"

The value of EDP

EDP promises to be viable for learners of English as a foreign language in developing countries. They take part in discussions related to health, science, agriculture, and education and come up with solutions. Learners' sense of responsibility becomes greater because they realize the importance of their ideas. The EDP class will help them build greater self-confidence and confidence in the future of their communities.